

Kunapipi

Volume 21 | Issue 2

Article 14

1999

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Recommended Citation

Ni Fhlathuin, Maire, The Location of Childhood: 'Great Expectations' in Post-Colonial London, *Kunapipi*, 21(2), 1999.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol21/iss2/14>

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Abstract

Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) is a novel about the creation of the self. In its 'writing back' to Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), it takes up the central themes of that novel: the exploitation of childhood and the child's struggle to find his own identity. At the same time, it constitutes a distinctly post-colonial account of the creation of Australia, as the child-figure becomes a representation of the new world. Inspired by Edward Said's reading of *Great Expectations* in *Culture and Imperialism*,¹ Carey adopts the generic conventions of the 1860s sensation novel (the genre, of course, of *Great Expectations*), and extends these, as well, to encompass the post-colonial concerns of Australia.

MÁIRE NÍ FHLATHÚIN

The Location of Childhood: 'Great Expectations' in Post-Colonial London

Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) is a novel about the creation of the self. In its 'writing back' to Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), it takes up the central themes of that novel: the exploitation of childhood and the child's struggle to find his own identity. At the same time, it constitutes a distinctly post-colonial account of the creation of Australia, as the child-figure becomes a representation of the new world. Inspired by Edward Said's reading of *Great Expectations* in *Culture and Imperialism*,¹ Carey adopts the generic conventions of the 1860s sensation novel (the genre, of course, of *Great Expectations*), and extends these, as well, to encompass the post-colonial concerns of Australia.

The sensation novel characteristically presents the patriarchal family and the law in a state of disorder, and interrogates the nature and status of these two institutions, and their sufficiency as a refuge for the people they are meant to protect.² The family, the law and the state itself are represented, in this genre, by the trope of the family home: in *Great Expectations* these include the blacksmith's cottage (home of Joe's inadequate fatherhood and Mrs Joe's tyrannical mothering); Satis House (where Miss Havisham reduces Estella to an instrument of her revenge); and the Pockets' household of neglected children. In the context of the colonial and post-colonial world, the metaphoric image of the political 'family' of the parent state and its subjects is expanded to include the family of the homeland and its colonies (settler colonies or colonized possessions). In Ania Loomba's words, the 'colonial state cast itself as the *parens patriae*, controlling but also supposedly providing for its children'.³ The literature of post-colonialism takes up the same metaphor, laden with associations of identity and belonging: one of the 'common themes of the literatures of settler colonies' is described as the 'problem of finding and defining "home"'.⁴ This metaphor is present from the beginning of the history of Britain and Australia. Watkin Tench invokes it at the very outset of his *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*: 'Some have been sanguine enough to foresee the most beneficial effects to the Parent State, from the Colony we are endeavouring to establish'.⁵ When the convict

ships set sail from the 'Mother Bank' off the Isle of Wight, the convicts were already cast as children; bad children first, 'abandoned' (to use Carey's word)⁶ and sent from the family for their disobedience, and then the offspring of the parent state producing their own nation. Both these images of childhood resonate throughout Carey's fiction, with the emphasis on the dependent and vulnerable nature of the child. As far back as *Illywhacker* (1985), Badgery asks, 'Does it make you happy to be a child all your life? That's what an agent is, a child serving a parent. If you want to serve the interests of the English, you go and be an agent for their aircraft, and you'll stay a damn child all your life'.⁷

Jack Maggs returns to the same theme, and the protagonist's return to London from Australia is explicitly presented as a casting-off of the role of the child. Asked about the possibility of going back to Australia, Jack Maggs says: 'I am a fucking *Englishman*, and I have English things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong.'⁸ Claiming England as his homeland, Jack Maggs refuses the association of himself with 'all that vermin' – the colonial outcasts, the convicts and settlers of Australia. In describing himself as 'a fucking Englishman', he is also rejecting literal childhood. Like Dickens's Abel Magwitch, he is metaphorically reversing the colonial family relationship. No longer the convict 'child', he insists on the role of adult, sexually active male: the father. Jack Maggs has returned to England to find his 'son', and seeks him in London, the location of home, the site of physical and colonial parenthood.

Peter Carey's London is a re-creation of Dickens's city, and, like its predecessor, functions also as a metonymical representation of English society and of the British colonial state. Its placenames (especially Great Queen Street in Westminster), and its pursuits of robbery and exploitation, connect it to the institutions and activities of Britain itself. London is a microcosm of the British empire, and Jack Maggs is its child, born from 'the mud flats 'neath London Bridge' (p. 75), and coming back from his first criminal expedition 'black as a nigger but carrying the King's silver' (p. 105). This London is also the home of Ma Britten, the 'Mother Britain' who anticipates Queen Victoria both metaphorically and in her description by Jack Maggs as 'the Queen of England' (p. 92). Her realm, however, is a lawless place. Her children are the petty criminals, Tom, Jack and Sophina, and the outlawed convicts shipped to Australia. In their misery and their uncontrollability, they constitute a symptom of the central failure of the novel, the failure of the patriarchal, colonial state.

This theme, the failure of patriarchy, is taken over by Carey from *Great Expectations* and the sensation novel genre. Much of the 'sensation' in this genre (fear, moral panic, and a sense of disorder in the world) is linked to the breakdown of order in society, manifested in the collapse or perversion of the patriarchal family. The sensation novel is peopled with weak or absent fathers; mother-figures 'unfeminine' in their strength; and

maltreated, victimized children. *Great Expectations* makes England, and London in particular, the location for the exploitation and corruption of children, a theme set out by Jaggers in his speech to Pip about their 'being generated in great numbers for certain destruction',⁹ and emphasized by Pip's first, famous encounter with Smithfield, St Paul's and Newgate Prison (pp. 163-4). Carey's London retains the trope of the failure of patriarchy, but he intensifies every aspect of it, making it even more 'sensational' than Dickens's original. Where Dickens's fathers were ineffectual or, like Joe, 'a larger species of child' (p. 9), Carey's are absent, criminal or murderous. Dickens's mothers are neglectful or cold; Carey's mother-figure is an abortionist. In these abnormal parents, Carey characterizes the parent, colonial state.

Jack Maggs is pervaded by the image of the absent father, the dying King. Elsewhere in Carey's fiction, *Illywhacker* has already established the association between the two figures, when Emma accepts the loss of the portrait of the King of England, thrown away by her husband, even though 'the monarch had been an important man in her father's house' (p. 452). By now, the image is more than metaphorical: the events of *Jack Maggs* happen in the early summer of 1837, as the old King, William IV, is slowly dying, within a few weeks to pass control of his country to Victoria – 'Her Majesty as soon it will be' (p. 270). On other levels of the story, the same theme is apparent. Jack Maggs has no father; Ma Britten has no husband; Tobias Oates is haunted by his own inadequate father – a man who will steal from his own son, a man Tobias believes a murderer. The absence of the father is accompanied, as in the sensation novel, by the rise of the monstrous or 'un-natural' mother. Ma Britten is Queen in a state without a King, mother in a family without a father. She is 'a force of nature' with 'long arms' and 'wild hair' – the opposite of the civilized good wife of patriarchy. Her skin smells of 'snakeroot and tansy' (p. 92), the raw materials of her trade as an abortionist. As in *Illywhacker*, the practice of abortion is associated with lawlessness, but also with a direct assault on patriarchy linked to the uncontrollable nature of women: the father is deprived of his son.¹⁰ Another such woman, in *Jack Maggs*, is Tobias Oates's mother, 'most loudly inconvenienced by his presence' (p. 182), who leaves him to make his own way in London from the age of five.

The families controlled by such parents are exploitative, not protective, of children. These are used for their economic value as thieves and prostitutes, 'raised', as Jack Maggs says, 'for a base purpose like a hog or a hen'. The 'mother', Ma Britten, is 'more concerned with business than [their] morals' (p. 239). The 'father' in the novel, the older male figure, is presented as a sexual predator – like the man who is the child prostitute Mercy's first client, or Silas, taking Jack Maggs to rob houses when Jack thinks he is being brought to school. Tobias Oates plays this role to his wife's young sister, 'the beautiful child with whom he was besotted' (p. 197). Around these figures, the novel is full of incidental details of the mistreatment of

children: the boy that Toby leaves 'waiting half the day' when he wants to buy his story (p. 42), the 'page boy put out in the frost with nothing but a pair of old hessians on his feet' (p. 57). The children who die in a gas explosion are the objects of Tobias Oates's compassion, but also the raw materials for his journalism. They all form the background to the two central motifs of the death of childhood: Jack Maggs's aborted son, and Lizzie's death, brought on by a double dose of abortion pills. In this London, the child who does not die becomes corrupt: the 'very kind boy' Jack Maggs meets as a convict (p. 264) has, twenty-four years later, become the man who fires his pistol at him.

In the account of these families, Carey presents London – and by extension, the British state – as an inadequate or perverted 'homeland', the site of a patriarchal system which can no longer sustain itself or protect its literal or colonial children. However, the idea of patriarchy *per se* is not condemned. Indeed, a stable patriarchy is presented as the ideal system of organizing the world. Jack Maggs's anger is directed at Ma Britten, the mother-figure, never at the father. The story he writes in invisible mirror-script is patterned on the narratives described by A.W. Baker as examples of 'a received mode of writing' about the convict experience,¹¹ the convict memoir with a flogging at its centre. While his horrific recollection of this event is focused on the soldier who flogged him, he refuses to extend his fear or resentment to the system of which the soldier is merely an instrument. Mercy interprets the story in this light, arguing that the flogging was an act of the State. But when she says, 'it were the King who lashed you'; he replies, 'We were beyond the King's sight. Not even God Himself could see into that pit' (p. 318). Faced with the chance to reject the patriarchal state that punished him, he chooses instead to blame it for weakness, for its inability to supervise its subjects; and later, when he returns to Australia, he becomes a patriarch himself.

The last pages of the novel describe the re-establishment of the patriarchal family. It is only in Australia that sexuality and parenthood are 'normalized': Jack and Mercy can be husband and wife, father and mother, protectors and educators of their children. Mercy, who knows 'what it is to lose a da', prevails on Jack Maggs to 'go home to [his] babies', to his 'real children' (pp. 312-3), and their fitness as parents is underlined by Carey's account of the five more children they have together. In a reversal of the original relationship between the London centre and the Australian periphery, Australia becomes the new 'homeland'. There, children are raised in a stable, patriarchal household, headed by a father who is a 'real' father and a mother who is a good wife rather than an independent matriarch. Mercy 'who had always been so impatient of the "rules" now [becomes] a disciplinarian' to her children, and a housekeeper who 'meticulously supervised' her servants (p. 327). In Sydney, Jack Maggs has a street named after him: this naming reflects Australian masculinity just as London's 'Great Queen Street' reflected

London's abnormal femininity. The cast-off convict children become the new fathers and mothers, and from the state they created, Carey writes his post-colonial reassessment of London – an urban graveyard, the site of a dying empire and of the abuse and death of childhood.

The nature of such a reassessment, and of Carey's post-colonial writing, has been a consistent theme in criticism of his work. His earlier fiction, especially *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), is often described in terms of its post-colonial imperative. Bill Ashcroft, for one, sees his narrative technique as a kind of 'interpolation' – writing back – parallel to that of Jean Rhys or J.M. Coetzee. Interpolation, he says, 'not only characterizes the most effective post-colonial oppositionality, but becomes the predominant mode of post-colonial agency'. Rather than accepting 'the basic premises of historical narrative', interpolation 'changes the master narrative itself'.¹² But, if the master narrative of colonialism is that of the colonial father – the white man building his empire – Carey has not so much changed it as taken it over. The values of the colonial state are present in *Jack Maggs* at the end of the story; the only change is in their embodiment by the people and the land of Australia, rather than Britain.

In an account of Carey's fiction pre-dating *Jack Maggs*, Graham Huggan comments on how Carey's fictions

interrogate the nation's cultural origins, showing them to be the constructs of hegemonic paternal law. Carey's fictions seem to illustrate here their postcolonial dimensions: in their refusal to pay respect to the nation's British founding-fathers; in their contempt for the protection offered by the 'parent' culture (or cultures); in their systematic dismantling of patrilineally transmitted myths¹³

This is not a reading of Carey that can accommodate *Jack Maggs*. In this book, Carey shows no wish to condemn the 'hegemonic paternal law'; Jack Maggs does not escape the colonial state of dependency by rejecting it, but by taking its structures, the same structures that failed in London, and re-making them. Having built 'London in his mind' to help him endure the torments of Australia (p. 321), he succeeds in re-making himself as an Englishman overseas. His career in Australia – saw-mill owner, proprietor of a hardware store, pub landlord, 'twice president of the shire' and president of the Cricket Club – is that of the English prosperous man transferred to a new world (p. 327). His Dickensian analogue is no longer Abel Magwitch, but Mr Micawber, making good as a Magistrate at the end of *David Copperfield*. Where *Illywhacker* offered motifs of rebellion against the father, *Jack Maggs* incorporates this same rebellion into the establishment of a new fatherhood, mirroring the old one.

This transformation occurs within the last two pages of the novel – a fantastic, wish-fulfilling ending that undermines the effect of driven realism sustained by the work preceding it, as surely as Dickens's last-

page 'shadow of no parting' between Pip and Estella undermined the moral edifice of *Great Expectations*. It is an uneasy ending, and this uneasiness is communicated to many of its readers, especially those who read the novel in the context of Australian or post-colonial literature. (Some reviewers treated *Jack Maggs* as an 'English' text, concentrating on the echoes of Dickens and making no mention of the Australian context, Carey's nationality or the novel's ending.¹⁴) One reader called the finale 'a happy ending of Dickensian perfunctoriness',¹⁵ a phrase that again recalls Dickens's struggles to reconcile himself to maturity in the fictional avatars of his child self. Other reviewers' reactions point to further areas of disquiet. Nicholas Jose refers to Jack Maggs's keepsake, 'two dark locks of baby's hair', and interpolates the parenthetical question: 'Was the mother Aboriginal?'.¹⁶ There is no hint in the novel that she might have been – she makes no appearance – but the question is an attempt to fill what may appear to a contemporary reader a disturbing vacancy in this happy ending. Unlike *Oscar and Lucinda*, this novel records only the voices of the white settlers in Australia. There were, of course, other people there, living in the vast spaces surrounding the town of Wingham, outside the safe family home of Jack Maggs, his good wife Mercy and their children. The absence of any reference to these other dispossessed is a disruptive element in this 'determinedly Australian and optimistic' ending.¹⁷ The novel, which structures its indictment of Britain around the mistreatment of London children, looks forward to the comfortable life of Jack Maggs and Mercy; but lets its cast into the future fall short of modern Australian policies on the disruption of Aboriginal families and the re-settlement of their children.

In his analysis of Carey's work cited above, Graham Huggan refers to the emergence of Australia as 'a palimpsest of altered images, with no "essential" self to return to or call unequivocally its own'.¹⁸ The narrative of Jack Maggs's Australian career might be seen as the creation of just such an 'essential' self. Its achievement, however, is costly. While Carey interrogates the myth of British colonial parenthood, he replaces it with another myth, the vision of an Australian homeland. According to a contemporary critic, 'places called home' are 'built on select inclusions', founded on a sharing of 'blood, race, class, gender or religion'.¹⁹ Such inclusions necessarily imply corresponding exclusions. Jack Maggs starts the book as 'other' – the excluded child of the British state. By its end, he has become the 'self', the representative of the new nation of Australia. The turn to fantasy allows Carey to gloss over the oppositional process by which the post-colonial self is fashioned, and the question of what further, more marginalized 'other' is created in the process of achieving selfhood.

NOTES

I am grateful to Bruce Woodcock for his generosity in sharing research materials.

1. Alan Attwood, 'What the Dickens?', *Sydney Morning Herald* ('Good Weekend' magazine), 2 August 1997, p. 23.
2. Notable examples include Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). In these and other such novels, the family (and the social order based on it) is threatened by individual lawlessness predicated on male or female adventurism; this is permitted to flourish by the weakness or complicity of the patriarchal figures meant to stand against it. For a brief introduction to this genre, see Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994).
3. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 216.
4. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 27.
5. Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, intro. L. F. Fitzhardinge (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1961), p. 5.
6. Desmond Christy, 'Inner Conviction', *Guardian*, 11 June 1998, p. 8. Carey also refers to his own experience of this dilemma: 'When I grew up the convicts were nothing to do with me and the people I must have identified with must have been the soldiers, the jailers, and England was home. My grandfather, who had never been here, called England home'.
7. Peter Carey, *Illywhacker* (London: Faber, 1985), p. 136. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
8. Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 128. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
9. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993 [orig. 1861]), p. 410. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
10. In *Illywhacker*, Horace celebrates his success in procuring an abortion drug by saying: 'To hell with the law ... the law is a monkey on a stick' (p. 175). Phoebe's reasons for wanting the abortion are expressed in terms of freedom and creativity ('Can't fly. Can't do it. Can't poetry.'), and she agrees in the end to have the child in exchange for a comprehensive legal document in which her husband guarantees her the right to fly (p. 180).
11. A.W. Baker, *Death is a Good Solution: The Convict Experience in Early Australia* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1984), p. 3.
12. Bill Ashcroft, 'Against the Tide of Time: Peter Carey's Interpolation into History', in *Writing the Nation: Self and Country in the Post-Colonial Imagination*, ed. John C. Hawley (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 1996), pp. 194-212 (pp. 198, 197, 198).
13. Graham Huggan, *Peter Carey* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1996), p. 86.
14. See, for example, David Nokes, 'Jack Maggs', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 September 1997, p. 8.
15. Peter Porter, 'Jack Maggs', *Guardian*, 18 September 1997, p. 16.
16. Nicholas Jose, 'Carey's Labyrinth', *Australian Book Review*, August 1997, p. 14.
17. Anthony J. Hassall, 'A Tale of Two Countries: Jack Maggs and Peter Carey's Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies* 18, 2 (1997), p. 129.
18. Graham Huggan, *Peter Carey*, p. 16.
19. Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 9.